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Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT REFORM
2157 RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING
WASHINGTON, DC 20515–6143

MAJORITY (202) 225–5074
FACSIMILE (202) 225–3974
MINORITY (202) 225–5051
TTY (202) 225–6852

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**SUBCOMMITTEE ON TECHNOLOGY, INFORMATION POLICY,
INTERGOVERNMENTAL RELATIONS AND THE CENSUS**
Congressman Adam Putnam, Chairman

**OVERSIGHT HEARING
STATEMENT BY ADAM PUTNAM, CHAIRMAN**

Hearing topic:

**"Project SAFECOM: More time. More money. More communication?
What progress have we made in achieving interoperable communication between
local, state, and federal first responders?"**

**Wednesday, September 8, 2004
2:00 p.m.
Room 2154, Rayburn House Office Building**

OPENING STATEMENT

Good afternoon and welcome to the Subcommittee's hearing on *"Project SAFECOM:
More time. More money. More communication? What progress have we made in
achieving interoperable communication between local, state, and federal first
responders?"*

The purpose of this hearing is to discuss the status and progress of achieving
communications interoperability among federal, state, and local first responders and to
continue the Subcommittee's oversight of related federal, state, and local government

programs. Specifically, this hearing will review the progress of Project SAFECOM, one of the President's 25 Quicksilver e-Government initiatives, in developing policies and regulations that encourage state and local agencies to work together to promote and establish first responder communications interoperability. In its short history, Project SAFECOM has been relocated to three different agencies with four different management teams. Now at the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the initiative appears to be progressively moving forward. In April 2004, Project SAFECOM adopted the "Statement of Requirements for Wireless Public Safety Communications and Interoperability." What remains unclear, however, is the status of implementation of these standards. Where are we now?

Interoperable communications is the ability of first responders to share time-sensitive information across disciplines and jurisdictions via communication systems in real time. On September 11, 2001, we witnessed a failure in communication not only among differing first responder agencies, but within the responding agencies themselves. The tragic loss of many lives was the most shocking event in our modern history. The tragedy of this event is compounded by the knowledge that the loss of many lives, particularly those of numerous first responders, could have potentially been prevented had there been fully interoperable communications.

Interoperability is not only important in managing a terror-related incident; it is also critical in answering the call of other emergencies. Federal, state, and local governments work together to answer many other types of emergencies. Here in our Nation's capital, we have the US Park Police, the US Capitol Police, and the Metropolitan Police Department working together frequently for crowd control at celebrations or for demonstrations. The 2003 wildfires of San Diego drew response teams from numerous federal, state, and local agencies, as well as from numerous other states. Most recently, in Florida, numerous federal, state, and local agencies worked together to evacuate 47 out of 67 counties, close to *2.8 million* people, in the state's largest ever evacuation for Hurricane Frances, only three weeks after approximately 1 million people were evacuated for Hurricane Charley.

The vast majority of infrastructure for these interoperable communications resides under the management of state and local responders. Consequently, the federal government's role through Project SAFECOM is one of facilitating the development of interoperable communication across the nation. Through standards development and implementation, the goal of Project SAFECOM is to avoid situations in which the only way to communicate and coordinate emergency response efforts is by switching a hand-held radio between responding agencies. By encouraging the adoption and implementation of standards, the hope is that cash-strapped local governments will not spend tens of millions of dollars on communications systems that prove to not be interoperable with surrounding counties. For instance, in October 2003, San Diego County was hit by the most devastating wildfire disaster in California history. Three major fires raged across the county, killing 16 people, leaving more than 390,000 scorched acres, and nearly 2700 residential or commercial buildings destroyed with many more damaged. In January 2004, a comprehensive study of Firestorm 2003 declared that better communication was necessary. Not all firefighters had uniform ability to communicate, first because while county fire agencies use spectrum in the 800 MHz radio frequency, state and federal agencies use a VHF system. Further, some officials report that San Diego County's $90 million regional communications system proved to be ineffective, or at the least, had performed sub par, in this and other major catastrophes. The system was first used in

1998 and was meant to enable 80 local, county, and state government agencies such as sheriff's deputies and firefighters to communicate during major emergencies. During Firestorm 2003, the system was plagued by busy signals – 38,000 in the South County and 68,000 in the East County. While fire administrators and many county officials say the system is better than what they had before, that is simply not good enough given the state of technology and the state of perpetual danger today – we *can* and *must* do better.

With the interoperable communications and homeland security grants available to state and local governments now also centralized under DHS within the Office of Domestic Preparedness (ODP), it appears that DHS has the "carrot" to persuade state and local governments to adopt the standards developed by Project SAFECOM. However, this appearance may prove to be an illusion because the grant money is awarded in the form of a block grant, with few opportunities to follow up to ensure that the standards tied to those grants are actually adopted and implemented.

Last November this Subcommittee held a joint hearing with the Subcommittee on National Security, Emerging Threats and International Relations to discuss the challenges of achieving first responder interoperable communications. Today's hearing is an opportunity to examine the continuing efforts, to measure the progress, and to determine the next steps in not only Project SAFECOM, but also in other federal, state, and local efforts. As several federal offices still play a role in achieving communications interoperability, this hearing also provides an opportunity to examine cross-agency and intergovernmental coordination in this effort.

We have two distinguished panels of witnesses today, the first comprised of representatives from the several federal offices working for communications interoperability. I am eager to hear about the current state of their efforts in achieving a fully interoperable communications network of first responders. Our second panel is comprised of a number of federal, state, and local officials who either work on the governance side of communications interoperability or who have first-hand disaster management experience involving multiple response teams. I eagerly look forward to the expert testimony these distinguished panels of leaders will provide today.

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